

Message Text

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PAGE 01 CANBER 06804 100612Z

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ACTION EA-09

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

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CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L CANBERRA 6804

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: AS, PINT

SUBJECT: ELECTION FEVER STIRS CANBERRA

1. SUMMARY: MOST POLITICAL OBSERVERS AND POLITICIANS IN CANBERRA ARE FREELY PREDICTING THAT THE LIBERAL-COUNTRY PARTY OPPOSITION WILL USE ITS MAJORITY IN THE FEDERAL SENATE TO REJECT THE WHITLAM GOVERNMENT'S SUPPLY BILLS, THE APPROPRIATION BILLS WHICH FINANCE THE GOVERNMENT'S OPERATIONS. THIS MOVE WOULD PRECIPITATE A POLITICAL CRISIS IN AUSTRALIA AND PROBABLY TRIGGER ELECTIONS AT LEAST FOR THE FEDERAL HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES BEFORE THE END OF 1975. THE CRUCIAL DECISION WILL BE MADE BY OPPOSITION LEADER MALCOLM FRASER AND IT IS CLEAR THAT HE HAS NOT YET DECIDED WHETHER TO SEEK TO BLOCK SUPPLY IN THE SENATE. END SUMMARY.

2. THE LATEST MORGAN GALLOP POLL TAKEN DURING SEPT 20-27, 1975 PERIOD SHOWS THAT LABOR SUPPORT STANDS AT 35 PCT. WHEREAS LIBERAL COUNTRY PARTY SUPPORT STANDS AT 57 PCT. WHEN MINOR PARTY SUPPORT IS REDISTRIBUTED TO THE MAIN PARTIES LABOR'S SHARE RISES TO 38 PCT. AND THE LIBERAL
CONFIDENTIAL
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PAGE 02 CANBER 06804 100612Z

COUNTRY PARTY SHARE RISES TO 59 PCT. WITH 3 PCT. UNDECIDED.
A FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION WHICH RESULTS IN EVEN

AT 15 PCT. SWING AGAINST THE ALP COULD COST ALP AS MANY AS 43 OF ITS 65 SEATS IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND GIVE THE LIBERAL COUNTRY PARTY 105 OF THE LOWER HOUSE'S 127 SEATS.

3. THE SAME MORGAN GALLOP POLL SHOWS THAT WHITLAM'S POPULARITY AS PRIME MINISTER STANDS AT 33 PCT. WHILE APPROVAL OF FRASER AS OPPOSITION LEADER STANDS AT 52 PCT. MORE SIGNIFICANTLY 58 PCT. OF THE PUBLIC DISAPPROVE OF WHITLAM AS PRIME MINISTER WHILE 52 PCT. APPROVE OF FRASER AS OPPOSITION LEADER.

4. GIVEN THESE FIGURES IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT MANY INFLUENTIAL LIBERAL AND COUNTRY PARTY SUPPORTERS IN THE BUSINESS AND FINANCIAL COMMUNITY AS WELL AS LIBERAL AND COUNTRY PARTY POLITICIANS ARE EAGER TO FORCE EARLY ELECTIONS. FRASER HAS PUBLICLY STATED THAT THE OPPOSITION PARTIES WOULD REJECT SUPPLY IN THE SENATE ONLY UNDER QTE EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES, END QTE BUT HIS SUPPORTERS ARE MAKING EFFORTS TO FIND AN EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCE FOR HIM.

5. THREE THINGS ARE HOLDING FRASER BACK. FIRST, HE IS A TRULY CONSERVATIVE MAN WHO BELIEVES STRONGLY IN ORDERLY GOVERNMENT. ONE OF HIS STRONGEST CRITICISMS OF THE LABOR GOVERNMENT IS THAT IT HAS FLAUNTED THE TRADITIONS OF AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT REPEATEDLY AND NEEDLESSLY. IT WOULD BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT FOR A MAN WHO HOLDS SUCH VIEWS TO BECOME THE FIRST OPPOSITION LEADER IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY TO REJECT SUPPLY BILLS IN THE SENATE TO FORCE OUT A GOVERNMENT WITH A WORKING MAJORITY IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. WHILE PROBABLY LEGAL THIS COURSE OF ACTION IS WITHOUT PRECEDENT. FRASER IS A MAN WHO WANTS TO COME TO POWER ON HIS OWN TERMS. HIS RISE TO OPPOSITION LEADER HAS BEEN CONTROLLED AND PATIENT. HE PROBABLY WOULDN'T WANT TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER BY USING A DUBIOUS PARLIAMENTARY MANEUVER.

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PAGE 03 CANBER 06804 100612Z

6. SECONDLY THERE IS SOME QUESTION WHETHER OPPOSITION SENATORS WILL AGREE TO VOTE AS A BLOC TO WITHHOLD SUPPLY. TWO OR THREE DEFECTIONS FROM THE OPPOSITION'S RANKS WOULD ENABLE THE BILLS TO SLIP THROUGH. IT WOULD RUIN FRASER POLITICALLY IF HE DECIDED TO BLOCK SUPPLY AND THEN COULDN'T SECURE THE NECESSARY VOTES.

7. FINALLY FRASER IS FACING A PRIME MINISTER WHO IS A RUTHLESS POLITICIAN. HE WILL USE EVERY TRICK IN THE BOOK TO SURVIVE. WHITLAM COULD ARGUE THAT A RE-

JECTION OF SUPPLY IN THE SENATE IS NOT GROUNDS FOR CALL-
ING AN ELECTION FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES;
HE COULD DISSOLVE BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT; HE COULD
CALL FOR ELECTIONS FOR HALF OF THE SENATE RATHER THAN
FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES; OR HE COULD SIMPLY
GO ON GOVERNING AND BLAME THE LACK OF GOVERNMENT FUNDS
ON THE OPPOSITION'S QUOTE UNCONSTITUTIONAL ACTION END QUOTE.
AND IF ALL ELSE FAILED WHITLAM WOULD BE IN A POSITION
TO GO TO THE PEOPLE WITH A BITTER, DIVISIVE CAMPAIGN
IN WHICH HE COULD ACCUSE THE OPPOSITION PARTIES, THE
VESTED INTERESTS, ETC. OF DESTROYING AUSTRALIAN PAR-
LIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY. WHILE THIS TACTIC WOULDN'T HELP
LABOR'S ELECTION PROSPECTS MUCH, IT WOULD STIR UP
AUSTRALIAN CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND MAKE IT EVEN MORE
DIFFICULT FOR A LIBERAL-COUNTRY PARTY GOVERNMENT TO
WORK WITH THE AUSTRALIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT.

8. FRASER'S BASIC INSTINCT IS PROBABLY NOT REPEAT
NOT TO REJECT SUPPLY THUS FOLLOWING AUSTRALIAN CUS-
TOM AND CONVENTION. HE COULD THEN ALLOW THE WHITLAM
GOVERNMENT TO FALL OVER TIME BECAUSE OF THE PUBLIC'S
BELIEF IN ITS INABILITY TO GOVERN EFFECTIVELY IN A
TIME OF ECONOMIC CRISIS. THIS DECISION WILL PROVIDE
A SEVERE TEST OF FRASER'S LEADERSHIP. WE SHOULD HAVE
THE ANSWER SOON.
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